Water Monster off the South Georgia Coast

Three decades of sightings have yielded no clues about the identity of an unknown sea serpent.

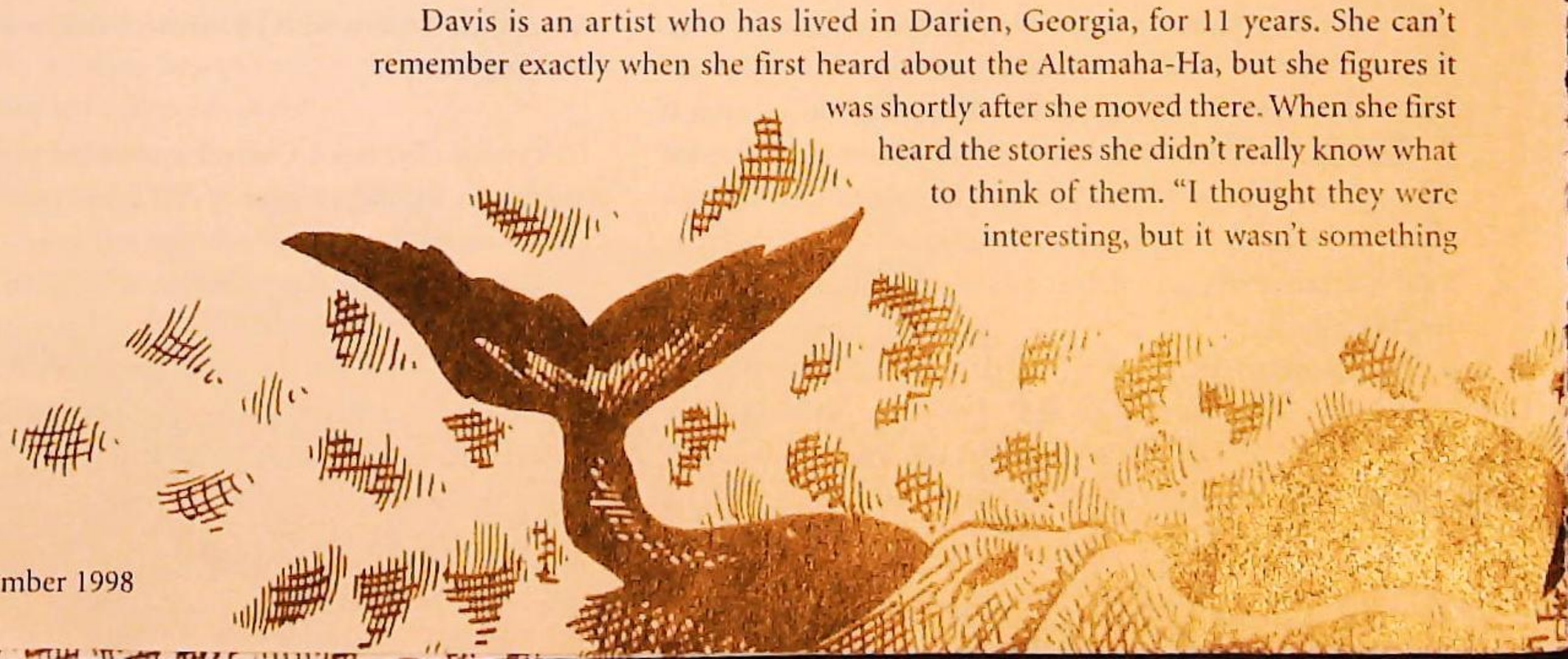
Something strange is lurking in the waters off the coast of south Georgia. Its appearance has been reported at least two dozen times over the past 30 years. Some area citizens call it the "Altamaha-Ha" — the water monster said to reside in their midst.

by Frank Spaeth

The area would seem to be a haven for such a creature. Marshy, with a lot of little inlets and rivers, there are plenty of places where a monster, or monsters, could go about its business, undisturbed by human visitors.

Local resident Ann Davis agrees. "I might be off track, but I'm beginning to wonder if they aren't migratory," she said. "Perhaps they come to this area to breed." Davis points out that the creatures seem to be seen only at certain times of year and that little ones have been sighted.

Davis is an artist who has lived in Darien, Georgia, for 11 years. She can't remember exactly when she first heard about the Altamaha-Ha, but she figures it was shortly after she moved there. When she first heard the stories she didn't really know what to think of them. "I thought they were interesting, but it wasn't something



fellow researchers and experiencers. "There are many people [in ufology] who will simply sit on their hands if I get into trouble," Strieber says. "They'll feel like an obstacle to their own success has been removed. Then they will see the community wither away afterward, because there isn't anyone else out there who's really trying to take this to the scientific community in a definite, clear way. It just isn't being done."

Is Strieber paranoid? Is there really so much to fear from the uncomprehending world around him? Strieber answers that question in *Confirmation*, arguing that if a person is totally without paranoia these days, he probably isn't totally sane either. One is reminded of the oft-repeated warning from *The X-Files*: "Trust no one."

Confirmation

Strieber's most recent book is a radical departure from the narrative of his earlier tomes. In *Confirmation: The Hard Evidence of Aliens Among Us*, he steps outside the subjective framework of his personal trials and presents a carefully constructed, nearly journalistic overview of why rational people should believe in the truth of UFOs and alien abduction.

Strieber says it has taken him ten years to be able to look objectively at the physical evidence of the abduction experience. He simply couldn't confront the strangeness of knowing, once and for all, that the existence of the Visitors is true, in concrete, real-world terms, without first taking a long time to prepare himself psychologically and emotionally for that knowledge.

Confirmation is one result of Strieber's newfound willingness to seek the difficult facts behind the dreamlike yet unmistakably physical contact with these entities.

In spite of the numerous snares that come with the territory, Strieber professes that he wouldn't trade his experiences with the Visitors for anything, because of the potential for human growth they appear to offer.

"We have a chance to get out, to become a cosmic species," he says. "Once we establish ourselves off-planet and outside our solar system, then our species will become effectively immortal, or last as long as the universe, potentially. I want us to have that chance. We're just at the beginning of humanity, not the end of it."

The Visitors, however, are not going to hand us that immortality on a silver platter, he says. They intend to make us work for it, to force the human species to create the means of our salvation through our own sweat and determination — even if that means putting up occasional blocks to our technological development, and at times appearing hostile to our infantile efforts to reach beyond our place in the universe. But what may look like movements to defeat us are, in truth, attempts to empower us.

"The problem is that we're locked into this conceptual level of Good vs. Evil: 'Are they going to help us or not?'" Strieber explains. "And how could they seem hostile when they're actually trying to help us? It becomes obvious if you realize that they're trying to make us strong. How do you make somebody strong? You make them exercise. You create, for example, questions they can't bear and that they can't answer."

In other words, don't expect a landing on the White House lawn. By Strieber's logic, for the aliens to simply hand over the plans for a new starship, as in 1997's hit movie *Contact*, would effectively weaken humanity. "We have to do this on our own," Strieber cautions, "or not at all."

But what can we do right now to grapple effectively with the mystery of the Visitors? One of Strieber's cherished hopes, and a fundamental reason he wrote *Confirmation*, is to finally stir up interest from the mainstream scientific community in UFO and alien abduction phenomena — to take the subject out of ufology's ghetto of charlatans and lunatics, and give it the dignity of thorough and exhaustive scientific study.

"The scientific community can address this in a rational way," he says. "There are already instruments and techniques that would allow us to deal with this scientifically at every level and answer some of the questions that now surround it. If they do not, then it is a major failure of the human intellect, and it could be an extremely serious one.

"There are lots of cults and people out there spreading bunkum stories. And because the scientific community never deals with this issue in a meaningful way, factual material turns into fantasy and superstition, and you have things like Heaven's Gate.

"On the surface, a lot of people are just amusing themselves and playing games with this," he says. "I'm not playing games. I'm not here for fun. I'm very serious about this, and I want to see this moved into the scientific community."

Strieber is certainly not alone in his keen desire to see the study of UFOs and alien abduction find its place among "respectable" research. But he may so far be the most passionate advocate of the untold numbers of people whose lives have been touched by contact with the Visitors. As Strieber once said, these Visitors have long since bypassed the media, government, and scientific community, and have gone directly to the people.

What does it mean to be one of the chosen? That may take a lifetime to learn, but for Strieber and others in his position, it is the most important question that can be asked — a question that consumes their every waking moment and penetrates their dreams with an insistent call to wake up and face the unknown. ■

UFO journalist **Sean Casteel** *unearthed the Bigelow Ranch mystery in the August issue of FATE and interviewed Heaven's Gate member Rio DiAngelo for the July issue.*

A few weeks after this interview, Whitley Strieber announced on his Communion Website (www.strieber.com) *that he had signed a deal with NBC for a one-hour special on* Confirmation *to air this fall.* Confirmation: The Hard Evidence of Aliens Among Us *is published by St. Martin's Press.*

that caught my attention very much — except being an artist it kind of captured my imagination," Davis said. "I didn't form an opinion right away as to whether it was true or not. It's just one of those things where unless you see it yourself you just don't form an opinion."

Although she wasn't sure at the time whether there really was an Altamaha-Ha, she decided to do a limited edition ceramic of the creature, based on reports she had heard. Later she wrote a children's story involving the Altamaha-Ha.

Davis explains, "While I was working on the ceramic piece I suddenly got to thinking about the Scottish settlers who came here. I always admired their character. I was thinking about them coming from Inverness, Scotland — the same area where Loch Ness is located." She wanted her storybook to be mostly local history for kids, with a bit of fantasy woven in. That's how the Altamaha-Ha became involved.

In her story, *The Tale of the Altamaha "Monster,"* a family moves from their native Scotland to Georgia. The family's three boys are forced to leave the monster from a nearby loch behind — or so they think. The creature ends up following them all the way to Georgia, where it finds comfortable living quarters near the family, in the waterways of the south Georgia coast. "Children seem to like the story," Davis said. "But it's not a serious approach to the monster of the river."

It wasn't until after publication of her book that Davis started to believe that there was something to the story of the Altamaha-Ha. "I started getting feedback from people I knew who had seen the creature or who knew people who had seen it, and I realized that this was really a serious thing," she explains. "I began to believe it was true because the people I talked to had credibility. They were not what people would call 'flaky.' They were serious. They hated to talk about it because they were teased about it, so it's not like they were after attention."

Since some of the Scottish settlers who came to the region were from the area near Loch Ness, it was possible that stories of water monsters had followed them to their new residence, incorporating ideas of the creature into Georgia's culture. When asked how descriptions of the Altamaha-Ha compared to those of the Loch Ness monster, Davis replies, "Only one person who has seen it would give a description that was similar to what I've heard about the Loch Ness monster. From what I've heard, the Loch Ness monster seems to be a plesiosaur-type creature. The Altamaha-Ha seems to be slimmer, more snake-like." Davis says, laughing, that she hates to say "snake-like" because it "throws fear into the heart of every Southerner to hear of a snake 40 feet long."

Davis also feels strongly that there is more than one Altamha-Ha. She notes that they have been seen in different sizes and, on a few occasions, more than one has been reported at the same time. "I wouldn't say there is any huge crop of them," Davis adds. "But I would say that for every one that's been reported there are at least 10 sightings that haven't been." She feels that many area fishermen have probably glimpsed the creatures and not said anything for fear of ridicule.

Monster Makes the Papers

While area fishermen may not want to share stories of the Altamaha-Ha, the local newspaper isn't afraid to tell the public about the creature. Kathleen Russell, editor of the *Darien News*, a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 3,600, has covered the story of the area's monster since the early 1980s.

"Somebody started talking to another reporter about seeing a monster in the Altamaha river," Russell says, "and all of a sudden people started paying attention." Russell's interest grew when she heard local fishermen mentioning that they had seen a creature like the one being described.

Russell has lived in the Darien area her whole life, and although she has not yet caught a glimpse of the Altamaha-Ha, she feels that she came close to seeing one recently. "Not long ago, my husband and I were out in our boat in Doboy Sound going to Sapalo Island, which is a big barrier island you can only get to by boat," she says. "On the way I saw something in the water creating a wake. I stood up on my seat so I could see it and I told my husband to circle around. But by the time we circled around it was gone."

Her newspaper has run numerous accounts of sightings of the Altamaha-Ha, and she has a few favorites. "One time I had the ex-mayor of Darien come to me and say, 'I hate to have to tell you this, but I saw it in the Champney river,'" Russell recalls. "Later, a car salesman told me he had seen it in the same river while on the same bridge." One of the sightings was in 1983 and the other was in 1993, but the descriptions the men gave were similar.

Although the creature was named affectionately after the Altamaha river, it has been reported in quite a few other area waterways. One report in 1980 came from a man who was fishing in Smith Lake, 20 miles upriver from Darien. It has also been seen at Two-Way Fish Camp, an area near where fresh water and salt water meet. Ann Davis said that similar creatures have aiso been reported in Glynn County, Georgia, as well.

Ann R. Davis

Author and artist Ann R. Davis used the Altamaha-Ha as inspiration for a children's story she wrote.

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as upper Florida, including Jacksonville and St. Augustine. "Ours seem to appear after most of those," Davis said. "What that means I don't know. If you put them all together they start forming a pattern, even though we don't know what it means yet." That the Altamaha-Ha has been seen in both fresh water and salt water makes this creature unique even among water monsters.

Russell shared an incident told to her in 1988. A man named Harvey Blackman, now deceased, was at Two-Way Fish Camp when a great wave rocked the dock he was standing on. Blackman looked around and saw "a monstrous something, 15 to 20 feet long — big around as a man's body." Blackman described the creature as slick-looking, with a grayish brown body and a snake-like head.

While Russell, Davis, and other area residents take the Altamaha-Ha seriously, the monster has also been enjoyed in a more lighthearted way. Russell remembers that it was the theme of Darien's annual parade one year. She also recalls that a society related to the creature was founded at the University of Georgia by a journalism professor and his students. "It was called SPASM (Society for Protecting the Altamaha-Ha Sea Monster)," Russell says. "They would send letters urging us not to hurt the sea monster." Overall, she's had a nice time over the years enjoying the creature. But she'd sure love to see it!

Most Recent Sighting

According to Davis, the Altamaha-Ha was sighted again during the first weekend of June. A group of youngsters saw it while they were hanging out on their family dock.

The mother of one of the boys told Davis that they were quite shaken up by what they had seen. Though the boys were ordinarily quite self-assured — taking great pride in being "cool" — their encounter with the beast affected even the "coolest" of the group. He was stuttering so badly as he tried to tell the story that the mother couldn't understand him at first. Another of the boys still won't go back in the water.

All the boys actually saw was about five feet of the creature's tail end as it arched itself through the water. However, that was enough for them to decide they never wanted to see it again.

So, What Is It?

While Russell and Davis both feel that the Altamaha-Ha is a legitimate water monster, they are open to other possibilities. Russell says that her recent encounter could have been nothing more than the wake caused by an alligator, although she adds that she doesn't think alligators cross Doboy Sound. She also brings up the possibility that it is some kind of giant eel native to the area but yet to be discovered. "I've got an open mind about it," she said.

To date, no one has been able to identify the creature. Marine biologists for the Georgia Department of Natural Resouces told Russell they had never seen or heard of such a creature. Even the Smithsonian said they had never received a description of anything like it before, adding that it was worth pursuing.

Yet other authorities, including the director of the University of Georgia's Museum of Natural History, don't think it is anything out of the ordinary. They propose that the "monster" may be nothing more than an eel or an oarfish.

Whatever the creature is, it is creating quite a stir among residents of and around Darien. Many feel that they definitely have a water monster in their area. Until they're proved wrong, this possibility is as plausible an explanation as any other of what exactly this strange Altamaha-Ha is. ■

Frank Spaeth *is an associate editor of FATE magazine and the editor of* Mysteries of the Deep *(Llewellyn). To find more information about the Altamaha-Ha check out the Internet at* www.gate.net/~anndavis/sighting.htm.